

# Women and the media: what do they want? A Special Polis Report

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**There are more women than ever before in the media, so has journalism about women changed?**

**Polis gathered a group of 50 women journalists and academics for a debate led by Channel 4 News presenter Samira Ahmed. This is the report written by Polis intern Tamsyn Dent.**

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## Introduction

This seminar was designed to bring together academics and journalists to discuss both how women are represented in the media, and how they act as media practitioners. Its purpose was to ask questions and give a sense of some current issues concerning women and the media.

It was based on some simple assumptions:


- There are far more women working in the news media.
- Gender and media studies are now relatively mature areas of analysis and research.
- There have been changes in the way that the media treats gender which reflect both social shifts and changes in the news media itself.

So how does all that affect the journalism?

There is an assumption that with an increased number of women working within the industry there is more coverage on women's issues and affairs. However statistics from the 2005 Global Media Monitoring project show that if news is a mirror of the world, then it is still very much a man's world. The report highlights that only 21 % of news subjects – the people who are interviewed, or whom the news is about – are female. This is a global phenomenon; there is not a single major news topic in which women outnumber men as newsmakers. When women do make the news it is often as celebrities or as homemakers.

## The seminar

As the joint initiative between the LSE and LCC, the Polis think tank has been set up to examine and discuss the media and its impact on society. At the event on Tuesday March 4<sup>th</sup>, two leading academics presented cases of female representation in the press to look at the messages that mass media were giving out about them. Rosalind Gill, Professor of Social Psychology and Cultural Theory at the Open University spoke about the domestic UK industry focusing on coverage about victims and perpetrators of sexually violent assaults. Dr Nadjie Al-Ali, Director at the Centre for Gender Studies, SOAS gave a more international perspective, speaking as someone who regularly contributes to and critiques the media for its representation of women from the Middle East, mainly Iraq. The seminar was chaired by Channel 4 News presenter and reporter, Samira Ahmed. As a working professional journalist in a newsroom she has first hand experience of how stories about women make it onto the broadcast schedule and has given previous lectures at the LSE about crime reporting of women.

 In her opening introduction, Samira commented how topical this discussion was given the recent extensive coverage in the news of violent crimes against women from the convictions of Mark Dixie for the murder of Sally – Anne Beaumont and Steve Wright, the 'Ipswich murderer' to the story of Colin Norris – the nurse convicted for killing 4 elderly women at hospitals in Leeds. Rosalind was able to use the coverage of Sally-Anne Bowman and Mark Dixie in her presentation.

## Women and sexuality in the media

Rosalind has written extensively on gender and the media and was based at the LSE before moving to the OU last year where she set up the Gender and Media masters programme. She started her presentation by talking about how the general UK media climate has developed an 'obsessive focus' on young women's bodies. She points to any

of the Lads magazines or the free newspapers that have become a part of every Londoners daily commute that rely on sexual images of young women as examples. Rosalind also showed some advertising campaigns that again rely on highly sexualized visions of women including the Dolce and Gabbana 'gang rape' advert. Rosalind pointed out that there has been a historical shift in the way women were portrayed in the 1950s and 60s and what we have now is an attitude that it is acceptable to portray women as sexual objects and that women themselves advocate their representations as modern, independent and sexual beings.

### **Victims of sexual crime**

She stated that this normalized 'image' of women is feeding into the newspapers and went into her main focus for discussion – the representation of women who have been victims of sexual crime. She raised the question why does this sort of reporting matter and are there any links between continued violence against women and the way that these stories are reported?

Less than 6% of all rape cases reported to the police end in a conviction. In fact the Guardian reported an article on the very day of the seminar about the police's failure in their responsibility to rape victims, opening with:

*"Police are contributing to the "appalling" conviction rate in rape cases because officers too often fail to take the alleged victims seriously enough"*

### **Rape and the media**

Rosalind offered some light on why there is such a low conviction rate of rape in the UK and why it is that the police don't take rape seriously. She referred to a report by Amnesty International in 2005 that shows how a blaming culture surrounds attitudes towards rape victims which places the responsibility for sexual attacks on women. This attitude can be attributed to the media and the way rape victims are written about by the press.

Rosalind looked at certain myths that are adopted by newspapers when writing about rape victims and attackers and then applied them to some recent cases. The myths include how rape is downgraded to 'just sex' when reported; that all rape attackers are from different racial or lower class backgrounds; that rape attackers are motivated by lust and unable to help themselves or that women cry rape on purpose for revenge and finally that any rapist who makes it into the news is some sort of extreme, deranged stranger.

#### **Media Myths**

She used the recent coverage of Sally-Anne Bowman and her attacker, Mark Dixie as well as coverage of Manchester United's football player, Jonny Evans who was accused of rape at the club's 2007 Christmas party to demonstrate how these myths are adopted in the UK media. Rosalind was clear to point out that this style of reporting was not solely used by the tabloid press but also adopted by broadsheets. Many of the images of Sally Anne Bowman showed her in highly sexualized poses, using phrases like 'sexy 18 year old', 'teenage model', 'blue-eyed stunner' in their description. Her attack was trivialized by the media through the use of phrases like 'fondled her breasts' in the description of her vicious and fatal attack. Dixie is described as a perverted monster. What the media is doing in this case is normalizing the image of the attacker as an extreme monster and at the same time depicting the victim in a trivialized and sexualized manner.

A quick analysis of the news coverage of the Jonny Evans case saw the footballer described as 'a real gent' (Daily Mirror) 'a rising star' (The Times) 'shy and well-behaved' and 'one of the quietest and most intelligent players on United's books... 9 GCSE grade As' (Daily Mirror). This in comparison to the victim where the reporting suggests that she made it up, she was drunk, she was up for it. The Times chose to headline the case with: 'When claims are false lives can be destroyed' bringing together a list of examples where women have been discovered as make false rape accusations against innocent high profile men.

Gill said that her purpose was to show how a certain group of women – those that are victims of sexual assault are being failed by a media that taps in to a dominant culture which places the blame and responsibility for sexual attack on the victim and a judicial system that is consistently failing to give justice to all those who are subjected from these violent attacks.


### **Audience response – the newsroom view**

Someone from the audience asked if the media was creating a discourse of 'mistrust'? That these extreme depictions of attackers like Mark Dixie and Steve Wright alongside advertising campaigns that warn women about

sexual assault (one example was the famous 'minicab' advert which depicts a young girl being forced into a cab by her friends who ultimately bear the responsibility for her rape) are conditioning us not to trust anyone?

A working journalist pointed out that the only way to get coverage of cases like rape was by looking at the extreme cases. Should coverage use less detail? If they did then they are less likely to be included and then the issue won't be out there in the public sphere. A writer from the Telegraph mentioned that papers have an in-house style when it comes to reporting these issues and the only way a newspaper is likely to publish a story differently is if an external organization like the Public Complaints Committee (PCC) impose standards of conduct by which they must follow.

### **Middle Eastern women and the media**

 Dr Nadjie Al-Ali is an expert on issues around women in the Middle East, particularly Iraq and so was able to give an international context to the representation of women in the media. Like Rosalind, Nadjie reminds us of the historical context. Since 9/11 she identifies a specific representation of Muslim women in Western media as that of the veiled, oppressed Muslim woman in need of liberation. She showed media coverage of stonings, honour killings, the reoccurring image of Iraqi fathers killing their daughters yet points out that these are few and extreme cases and misrepresent women's position in. She commented that people are often shocked when she shows them the picture of Iraqi women marching on women's day in Baghdad in 1962 and pointed out that in the 1950s and 60s there was a strong feminist movement in Iraq. This image of the independent woman in an Islamic context is not one we are used to in the western media.

### **Western misrepresentations**

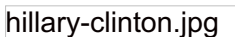
The reason for this western misrepresentation of reality is a self-fulfilling motivation, particularly in the US media which uses stories on the atrocities of women in Islamic countries as a reason to invade countries like Iraq to liberate women. The discourses and language adopted to represent 'Islam' would not, Al-Ali argues be attributed towards Christianity. She also talked about the extensive focus on the veil in western media as a sign of oppression when in fact, a study at Cairo University on women that wore the Hijab showed a whole range of motivations for why women chose to wear the hijab ranging from motivations of fashion, freedom from parental control, a way to attract boys to a resistance of western globalization.

Nadjie claims that women in Iraq and from Middle Eastern countries have complex and diverse lives and that the western media needs to resist this discourse of a clash of civilizations. Since 2003 the women of Iraq have been represented as either victims or heroines; images that do not reflect reality and one of the consequences of this has been the naturalization of violence against women via Islam.

Nadjie ended her presentation with some suggestions for improvement. That the media needs to include more nuanced representations of difference and diversity, and in the Iraqi case stop the focus on religious differences. She also recommended that they shift the focus away from Islam and Islamophobic stereotypes.

### **Questions**

One member of the audience asked about the representation of powerful women in the media. Nadjie spoke of their general absence but that when they are covered; they are subjected to 'fetishisation' and ridicule giving examples of the press coverage of Hillary Clinton or the late Benazir Bhutto. Rosalind stated that the powerful female voice is still not normalised or accepted in the media.



One delegate asked what were Dr Al-Ali's thoughts regarding the representation of female suicide bombers? Nadjie responded that the media still don't know what to do with female suicide bombers but that one official government response has been to label them as mentally handicapped. Media coverage of suicide bombers still focuses on Islamic fundamentalists keeping the issue to a discourse of religion.

The final question asked if there was any correlation between the number male senior editors and deputy editors and the content that is produced. Rosalind answered that although many of the senior management positions are held by men, there are many more women working in the profession particularly as freelance journalists. The myths she described have become the norm, an ingrained style of reporting that doesn't relate to gender.

### **Final Thoughts**

What this seminar revealed is that there are many complex issues surrounding the representation of women in the media that particularly relate to our wider current culture. Although both these presentations gave fairly depressing

depictions of how women are written about and the sort of consequences that can result, the fact is there are more women working in the field and raising awareness around these issues relating to women.

In her conclusion, Samira Ahmed urged everyone to complain more – write letters to the PCC and the ASA when they see or read an article, advert or news report that they find degrading or unsuitable.

**LINKS:**

Press complaints commission:

<http://www.pcc.org.uk/>

Advertising Standards Agency

<http://www.asa.org.uk/asa/>

LSE Gender Institute:

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/genderInstitute/>

Global Media Monitoring project – link to report:

[http://www.whomakesthenews.org/who\\_makes\\_the\\_news/report\\_2005](http://www.whomakesthenews.org/who_makes_the_news/report_2005)

Polis weblog:

[www.charliebeckett.org](http://www.charliebeckett.org)

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